

# Epidural Anesthesia and Childbirth: *The Choice is Yours!*



## What is Epidural Anesthesia?

An epidural is a method of controlling pain during childbirth. A needle is first inserted into the epidural space that surrounds the spinal cord in the lower back. Then a small tube, or “catheter,” is threaded through the needle into the space and the needle is removed. The catheter is securely taped to the back, and remains there until after the baby is born. Medication is given through the catheter to block the feeling of pain from the lower body. Even with the epidural in place, the mother-to-be should feel the pressure of contractions and have the urge to push when the time comes.



## Common Questions About Epidurals

- q **Is the epidural injection painful?**  
There is some discomfort when the skin in the lower back is numbed with medicine. After that, the woman only feels pressure as the tube, or catheter, is placed.
- q **When will the epidural be placed?**  
The epidural is usually placed when the cervix is dilated to 4 to 5 centimeters.
- q **Will the epidural slow labor?**  
A 1998 study showed that women who used epidurals were in labor about 1½ hours longer than women who used IV pain medication. Also, women were able to push the baby out faster when they did not have an epidural.

q **Do epidurals increase the chance of a C-section?**

Opinions vary on whether epidurals lead to Cesarean deliveries. Some people believe that because epidurals prolong labor, they can lead to fetal distress. However, most women who use epidurals are able to deliver vaginally.



## Benefits of Epidural Anesthesia

- q Allows mothers to rest if the labor is prolonged
- q Enables some women to cope with the discomfort of childbirth so they can have a more positive birth experience
- q Allows mothers who deliver by C-section to stay awake, and provides effective pain relief during recovery
- q Many mothers have used epidurals during childbirth, so its use has been well studied
- q Relieves pain during forceps delivery, especially when the baby must be turned

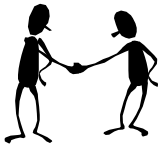
According to studies, babies born to mothers who used epidurals do not have a higher risk of health problems long term



## Disadvantages of Epidural Use

- q Epidurals often cause a sudden drop in the mother's blood pressure, so it must be checked frequently to ensure adequate blood flow to the baby. If the mother's blood pressure drops too low, she may be treated with IV fluids, medications, and oxygen.

- ⌚ About 1% of women who use epidurals experience a severe headache caused by leakage of spinal fluid. If the headache does not resolve, the leakage can be fixed by a special procedure.
- ⌚ Some people experience side effects such as shivering, ringing of the ears, backache, soreness where the needle was inserted, nausea, or difficulty urinating.
- ⌚ Epidural use may make pushing more difficult. This can increase the length of time for labor and delivery and may lead to the use of forceps to help the baby through the birth canal.
- ⌚ Women who use epidurals must stay in bed on their side, and have continuous monitoring for changes in fetal heart rate.
- ⌚ Because the lower half of the body is numbed, the woman is usually not able to walk without assistance for a few hours after her baby is born.
- ⌚ In extremely rare instances, there have been cases of permanent nerve damage in the mother where the catheter was placed.



## Talk to Your Doctor or Midwife

There are cases when epidurals should not be used for childbirth. If you feel you would like to use an epidural during your birth, or have more questions about epidurals, it is important for you to talk with your doctor or midwife. The information in this pamphlet is for educational purposes only, and is not intended to replace the advice of a trained health care professional.

## References

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